

## **Submission from Rachel O'Neill, University of Edinburgh**

### **Inquiry on learning foreign languages in Primary Schools**

Response from: Rachel O'Neill  
Lecturer, Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh

I lecture in deaf education at the university and I have a particular interest in British Sign Language. I am a fluent BSL user myself. The Language Learning in Scotland a 1+2 approach raises many issues about how it could be applied to BSL which I would like to address. I also teach on the Bed Primary degree.

First of all I would like to say what an excellent report it is. It has a clear vision and is bravely trying to change Scottish education in a very positive direction. It is a very inspiring document. I support most of the recommendations, but I will comment here on the ones where BSL teaching and learning could be focused on more.

#### **Q1. Is there enough funding for the Scottish Government's proposal (including use of EU money)?**

It is not clear from the report exactly how much funding is available, but there is a suggestion of about £12m. (page 35.4). It is not clear how long the previous £4m lasted for and how long the initiative to implement better teaching and learning of modern languages would take.

#### **Q2. Do existing teachers have the skills and teaching resources available for language tuition? Are existing teachers and teaching assistants equipped to teach languages? Should there be more training and support for new and existing teachers for language teaching?**

I was pleased to see that British Sign Language was acknowledged as a community language in the report (p. 13). However, there are many issues about actually achieving successful teaching of BSL in schools, at both primary and secondary levels. Some schools across Scotland are already doing this using several different models and I believe it is important to evaluate and compare these models.

The first example is from St Margaret's Primary School in Fife where by chance a number of deaf children from Deaf families are educated. Hearing children in this school have been learning BSL taught by a teacher of deaf children alongside a BSL tutor provided by Fife Social Services. The children have taken Signature exams (the exam board often used for sign language exams for adults). Recently the school has had an excellent inspection report, and HMIE commented on the fact that often it was difficult to tell which pupils were deaf and which were hearing because they were using BSL in class to learn with.

The second example is Our Lady of Lourdes PS in South Lanarkshire. Again by chance a family of 5 deaf children has moved into the school over the past year. The

local authority has taken a very pro-active approach and appointed 3 interpreters, with the promise of supporting them to qualified interpreter level. The teachers of deaf children, one of whom is Deaf herself, run a lunch time signing club. This school has only recently started working with signing pupils but I think could potentially move to teach BSL to children as part of the curriculum over the next year.

In Grange Academy, Kilmarnock, a recently qualified teacher who is partially deaf and from a Deaf family is teaching BSL to hearing and deaf children. They use Signature as the exam board. This is a very popular option in the school and has motivated some children who were not otherwise be interested in learning a language.

In Dingwall Academy a teacher of deaf children who happens also to be a registered BSL / English interpreter is co-working with a qualified BSL tutor to teach BSL to deaf and hearing children. They are looking for accreditation at N4 and N5 level and can't find anything suitable through SQA. BSL is an option which is enthusiastically being taken up by some confident young linguists at the school.

These examples show that where BSL is being taught in schools in Scotland at present it is usually linked to deaf education. All these schools have groups of deaf BSL users and that is often the motivation for children to learn the language.

However, there are dangers in teachers of deaf children teaching BSL. In each of the examples I have given there are teachers of deaf children who have fluency in BSL, but we know from surveys of deaf education in Scotland that only 10% of them have a level which is equivalent or better to Higher. Current government regulations for teachers of deaf children ask only for Signature level 1 BSL which is a qualification that can be gained after an evening class of a year. This situation may of course change if a BSL Act is passed and the guidance may be altered.

Furthermore, taking teacher of deaf children time away from the deaf children to teach hearing children a language is dangerous. Teachers of deaf children do not have any particular training in communicative language teaching methods. They have limited time with large numbers of deaf pupils, and this should be their first priority.

So to expand the possibility of BSL being taught in schools it would be better to look to other sources:

a. Deaf people who are already BSL tutors. The report discusses (page 33 point 6 - 8) that other fluent native speakers could be trained. I think this is an excellent idea but in the case of Deaf BSL tutors some may have difficulties with literacy. This is not because they are BSL users, but because they were diagnosed deaf late, their teachers often did not use BSL with them at all, and they had a poor education. Access to Work funding available through the Job Centre would be available to these employees and could be used to allow Deaf staff to take part in staff meetings, training etc.

b. Children of deaf adults are another group who have fluent BSL skills and are often in other areas of work, but would like to get into teaching or supporting BSL

development in schools. Local authorities could make a call to engage with this group through Deaf Centres and local media. Many in this group are already BSL / English interpreters but some may want to train as a support worker for promoting BSL or find a route into teaching. At present there are not very many flexible routes into teaching in Scotland.

c. Graduates of the new Heriot Watt degree programme in BSL / English interpreting. Some of these students may decide to get a PGDE and teach. They would be bilingual in BSL and English. Applications for the second year are high so potentially this is a good source of graduates suitable for BSL teaching. They are not deaf, and it must be recognised that many in the Deaf community would prefer to have Deaf teachers in place.

Ideally there would be a route for Deaf people to get into teaching BSL in schools: the provision of an access course where Higher English is taught in BSL feeding into an existing access course with good interpreting and notetaking provision. There are a number of Deaf BSL users going through the process of training to become a teacher at the moment. Because there are not likely to be huge numbers of schools wanting to offer BSL, encouraging just a few more Deaf people into the teaching profession could make a large difference.

The BSL Bill which I believe will soon be proposed by MSP Mark Griffin is not likely to refer very directly to education. However, if publicly funded bodies have to make language plans to encourage the development and preservation of BSL, perhaps it will become more possible to argue for better support for Deaf people to train as school teachers and native language models for the language in schools. I would argue that all three groups, a to c, should be considered.

The Deaf community itself places a very high reliance on BSL being taught in schools as the main solution to their communication breakdowns in everyday life with hearing people. I think within the community there is a belief that all schools should offer BSL to all hearing children. Personally I think it is important that a minimum of one nursery, primary school and secondary school per local authority should offer BSL. I would like to see these centres and schools properly staffed by qualified teachers who have had training in language teaching methods in relation to BSL. Deaf children would benefit from this, because it would give them an environment in each local authority in the country where they can *acquire* BSL. As 95% of deaf children are born to hearing families, the automatic choice of many families is speech. However, it is not necessary to choose once and for all. Many deaf children start with very weak language skills because their parents can't get to learn BSL in their area, and the schools don't offer anyone who can use it either.

So the report 1+2 assumes the 1. For deaf children the first language is often very delayed. This government initiative could support language learning by hearing children and offer deaf children the possibility too of becoming bilingual. At present very few deaf children in Scotland get that chance now. There are actually very few examples across Scotland of schools where deaf (let alone hearing) children can learn BSL from a young age.

**Q3. What is the capacity within the curriculum to accommodate greater language study? Can language learning be embedded in existing teaching?**

Yes, I believe it can. It will depend on excellent partnership work between confident primary teachers and language specialists. The section of the report (6.1 on page 20) suggesting that CLIL, Content and Language Integrated Learning, is a very good idea. This approach works well with BSL and could be implemented by drawing in Deaf tutors from adult education contexts who have other skills, e.g. ICT, history, video.

**Q4. The choice of languages for teaching – which languages should children be learning and why?**

The mention in the report of BSL was encouraging, and its place alongside other languages such as Gaelic and community languages. The Deaf community want hearing people to be able to use BSL so that their daily lives are less frustrating. So the citizenship purpose is very important.

It is important that BSL is regarded as a proper language in schools. At present simple code systems such as Signalong and Makaton are often mistaken for a natural language and used in a very basic way by teachers, especially in nurseries and special education settings.

The curriculum of BSL teaching could be developed in the CfE framework in a way parallel to Gaelic. Within this there could be teaching about the history and culture of BSL using resources produced by the Deaf community. There could also be at secondary level more exploration of the literature of BSL as illustrated by analysis of BSL poems (Sutton-Spence, Bristol University website).

It is important, therefore, that there are accredited pathways, preferably with SQA at N3 to Higher level. At present SQA qualifications in BSL are aimed at adults and there is no suitable accreditation for school children. Presumably if a BSL Act is passed SQA will address this issue.

**Q5. The role of languages in economic development – what languages should children be learning to benefit their future careers, and to help Scotland flourish economically?**

BSL is a very useful language for work purposes. People who are fluent in the language can train as BSL / English interpreters, as social workers or teachers, as support workers and carers. Bilingual skills in BSL and English are extremely useful in a whole range of jobs from over the counter service to professions such as medicine.

Reference:

Sutton-Spence, Bristol University BSL Poetry website:

<http://www.bris.ac.uk/education/research/sites/mics/>

